

## *The New Culture Industry*

*Tracing democratization, cultural pluralism, and a new 'stillness' in modern music*



Augie Savoy

Professor Jennifer Friedlander

9/28/20

PREFACE

In this country, it's very hard for creative thought to escape capitalism.

—Juan Atkins

I have the impression that many of the elements that are supposed to provide access to music actually impoverish our relationship with it.

—Michel Foucault

As a listener, my earliest memory of music is hearing Michael Jackson's *Off the Wall* on a portable CD player when I went to pre-school in Norway. Because my family had recently moved there, I had no experience speaking Norwegian and, until I figured it out, my parents thought I could listen to music to pass the time. For better or worse, it did far more than that. It started my love affair with music. On the surface, *Off the Wall* was straight to the point, energetic, and loud. As I replayed it, I realized that I could stick my head into the production and hear all the small details. The drums were rigid and robotic. The bass was relaxed and fluid. Michael Jackson's voice was elastic, traveling across an entire emotional spectrum from tender to harsh. The production felt like a spectrum of different faces and characters. It was the storytelling and *humanness* of the record that made it compelling. It turned an uneventful day in pre-school, surrounded by kids I couldn't understand, into a cinematic piece of art.

Like Michael Jackson's legacy, however, my relationship to music has become more complicated as I've gotten older. I've grown aware of how the gratification and pleasure of music has nuance. I've realized there's a politics of representation that directly affects commercial music and its larger-than-life pop stars. Lastly, I recognize that it's dangerous to dismiss the intersectionality of politics and culture. As my understanding of reality matures, music has stopped augmenting it with the same simplicity. I still experience the feeling of fantasy and transportation

that I did when I was younger, but music has also become a reflection of our splintered world and the issues that face it.

As someone who creates music, I approach the industry from a different perspective. Behind the curtain, music is increasingly complex and technical, especially when artists are expected to do everything from writing, arranging, producing, mixing, and mastering nowadays. The harsh reality of the current music economy and the disastrous impact of services like Apple Music or Spotify is a far cry from the imaginary world I experienced as a kid. It's a new challenge for artists to manage and traverse a professional career. The democratization of music production, distribution, and promotion have all contributed to conceiving a new era in entertainment. The market is saturated with a never-ending flow of content. There's an economy of attention that rewards quick sound bites and shock value over quality. The advent of social media and the rise of digital icons has further divorced the function of artists from the real world.

As a person situated between two opposite experiences, I've felt firsthand a political and social shift in the music industry. Every time I log onto social media, I observe a cultural and digital isolation that seems to be characteristic of our time yet does not accurately appear in the academic literature that seeks to codify it. Musicians often take comfort in never having to formally classify or structure their thoughts. Music is an alternative form of expression that exists beyond words. In writing this paper, I feel compelled to leave that world and put a face to the cultural zeitgeist that has reshaped the topography of our cultural and sociopolitical interactions. Popular music, though often dismissed, is the modern-day canary in a coal mine. It's a shifting landscape that actively responds to the social and political conditions it exists within. A serious interrogation of music can elucidate far-more than pop divas and mainstream gimmicks. It invites a more serious line of questioning. Has the democratization of music distanced us from the

‘stillness’ that Adorno and Horkheimer lamented on in *The Culture Industry*? Or has this democratization had the inverse effect as Jodi Dean’s theory of communicative capitalism could suggest? How does the social relationship between subculture and the mainstream operate in our current music landscape? And how does this affect the reflexivity of our public forum?

These questions can never be answered in their totality and I make no effort to pursue that goal. The aim is to reconcile my personal experiences and emotions with pre-existing scholarship and theoretical frameworks. I want to give an ideological face to something I know but cannot explain.

My experiential and implicit understanding of the industry is that the expectations of mainstream music have changed. In the past, there were competing genres in popular music, but they were in conversation with each other. In the 80s with the mainstream rise of synth pop, there were still bands like Echo and the Bunnymen or The Cure that didn’t ditch their guitars for analog drum machines, but they did start close miking their drum kits to make them *sound* like drum machines (Buskin, *The Cure*). In this way, there has always been a cultural status quo that bands felt pressured to follow. Nowadays, it seems like mainstream culture has splintered into separate pieces. Popular music is aesthetically and sonically schizophrenic. Bedroom pop, hyper pop, Soundcloud rap, and 80s nostalgia all exist simultaneously without interaction. There’s no dominant narrative in modern music that binds these disparate styles together. But what’s the effect of this? What’s the impact on listeners? There are obvious downsides to a restrictive and hegemonic narrative in culture, but it does unify listeners with a common set of experiences and values. The lack of dialogue between these separate styles might be indicative of something larger: a new kind of ‘stillness’ in our music landscape. Unlike the ‘stillness’ of the 40s, the current passivity in our cultural sphere is a product of the democratization of the music industry and

the cultural pluralism it promotes. By tracing the stylistic contours of the music industry, the current sociopolitical condition becomes apparent.

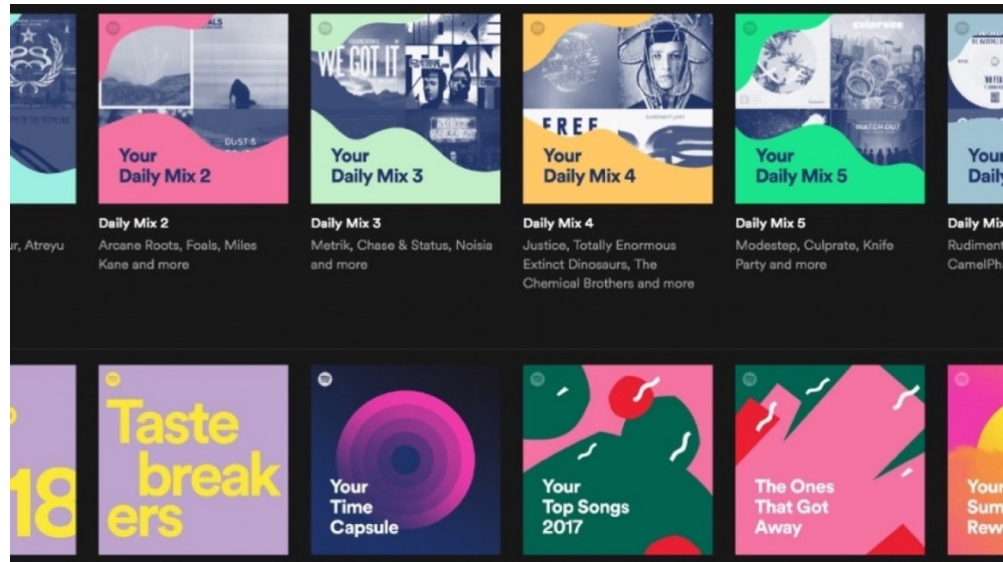
### OUR NEW LANDSCAPE

The internet is a new domain that has grossly expanded the reach of capitalism. As Robert W. McChesney discusses in his book *Digital Disconnect: How the Internet is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*, the internet accentuated the already present and foundational issues with capitalism, like monopolization, labor inequality, and advertising. The digital revolution has therefore contributed greatly to the economic downturn that America has experienced in these past generations. According to economist Joseph E. Stiglitz, there's no theoretical framework that can satisfactorily explain this downward trend, but the internet is invariably one of its factors (Chakravarti). With almost sixty percent of the world population using the internet, the battleground for competition and the production of content has escalated beyond the material world.

Without widespread physical format like CD's, music is now a part of that non-material world. The value of an artist's music is negligible nowadays and their only chance at surviving is to tap into a moment of viral fame that will begin one hour and end the next. With billions of people online, there's no shortage of listeners but the ladder to mainstream success has grown impenetrably high and anything less than the top step is worthless. With Spotify paying artists \$0.0032 per stream and other services adopting similar practices, artists have to reach a higher level of success than ever before to remain financially independent and focus their career entirely on music (McCormack).

The various curated playlists on streaming services like Apple Music, Tidal, or Spotify are another gatekeeper for mainstream success. Playlists like Spotify's "All New Indie" or "Post

Punk 2k” are hand-picked by staffers and invite listeners to discover artists based on their general music preferences (Aswad). Artists are allowed to pitch individual tracks to the curators, but the chances of being discovered are minimal.



*Fig 2. Spotify has a wide variety of curated and computer-generated playlists*

Instead, it's likelier to be spotted by the Spotify algorithm. The algorithm monitors new releases and which ones are gaining traction on the platform. Once they've been added to a playlist, the streams on a song will often skyrocket to the millions and open a series of doors for the artist, including major record label offers. In this way, a playlist placement holds a tremendous amount of social and monetary capital. Recognizing this, Spotify has plans to incorporate a new service that allows artists to give a percentage of their royalties to Spotify to increase their chances of getting an important playlist placement (Hern). In this way, Spotify is arguably leveraging and lording their influence on the music economy over their artists. It's especially malicious given that Spotify is already making a fortune, while artists are barely making ends meet. In 2020, artists need to accumulate over three hundred thousand streams per month to make minimum wage (Daly). Beyond monetary value, the role of music has also shifted in our new digital landscape.

With music's constant appearance on social media applications like TikTok and Instagram, artists need to create different types of songs to take advantage of these apps and achieve mainstream success. According to *LA Times* pop critic Mikael Wood, TikTok has been especially transformative for emerging artists and one of the feeding grounds for major labels to scout new talent (Garcia-Navarro). Several artists like Lil Nas X, Blanco Brown, and Sueco the Child had their big break on TikTok by producing catchy songs that are well-suited for the various dance challenges that Gen Z listeners perform on the app (Ibid.). The format favors earworm songs that can grab a listener's ear within the fifteen second time period that TikTok allots for videos.



***Fig 1. Social media personality Charli D'Amelio who became famous on TikTok and has since amassed over one hundred million followers***

Beyond scouting for talent, major labels advertise music by soliciting big TikTok stars like Charli D'Amelio to create videos with specific songs on their account. For example, Leanne Bailey, a woman in her forties who advertises her bakery on TikTok with cookie decorating videos

set to music, gets ten to fifteen inquiries a day from major record labels to use their songs in return for money (Leight). In this way, social media applications are a new gateway for emerging artists in the music industry to find an audience and a new opportunity for established record labels to find talent.

In terms of consumers, the online communities that these social media platforms and computer-generated playlists foster deliver an artificial and constructed sense of grouphood. While users on TikTok or Spotify willfully assemble into groups and follow social media personalities or musicians that they enjoy, the applications themselves play a huge part in this process. On Spotify, the “Release Radar” and “Discover Weekly” playlists are computer-generated and unique for each user. Based on prior listening history, the playlists point listeners in the direction of other artists or genres that they might enjoy. Also, Spotify automatically plays recommended music after a user finishes listening to an album or song. TikTok has similar recommendation algorithms and curated explore pages that privilege viral content over normal videos. Based on their interests, these applications automatically cultivate a digital reality for their users, pairing them with other likeminded individuals and favorable content.

### BIG BUSINESS AND D.I.Y. CULTURE

Before the creation of Napster and the subsequent era of piracy (Eamonn), the music industry was run by an oligopoly of major labels, but that business model has been irrevocably disrupted. In the past, their A&R team would find up-and-coming artists and turn them into profitable recording artists by setting up distribution, handling their PR, run advertising campaigns, and even handle their wardrobe among other responsibilities (Wikström). They effectively dominated the music industry until the advent of the internet. Major labels are no longer the creators of mainstream success. They adapted to find new ways of controlling the money flow generated by



recording artists. They offer artists the chance to amplify and market their existing fanbase and work with all the big streaming companies so they can ensure playlist placements. The major labels also help put together a tour schedule, connect artists with remixers or collaborators, and facilitate working with corporate sponsors which, until recently, would have meant career suicide (Roland). The lack of money in music allows artists to maintain artistic integrity while partnering with big business because consumers recognize the difficulty of being a professional musician. Fans of the rapper Travis Scott lauded his twenty-million-dollar McDonald's deal with merchandise selling out in a matter of seconds and Scott-style burgers quickly running out of supply, despite the meal not adding a single new ingredient to the pre-existing McDonald's menu (Levin).

Compared to previous decades, the amount of major label involvement today is minimal. Nowadays, artists are expected to do everything themselves. With affordable music production software and AI mastering services, there's been an influx of D.I.Y music (Sterne and Razlogova). The newfound democratization has had its disadvantages, however. In "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," Tiziana Terranova argues that free labor has become a new trait of the modern culture industry. The positive outcome for artists is that the internet has become a site of disintermediation that allows direct connection and personal advertisement. The downside is a digital economy that is dependent on free labor and, while that can be productive in certain scenarios, it's a symptomatic exploitation of late-stage capitalist societies.

Out of the digital economy, a D.I.Y. culture appeared in everything from television, clothing, comic books, to music. Although it risks causing economic stratification, there are benefits to this new digital culture. In past decades, pop stars sold their own brand of costumed fictions. With the support of a major label, these were huge budget productions that had professional music videos, expensive stage setups, and a crew of choreographed dancers. As Spencer

Kornhaber argues in “How Pop Music’s Teenage Dream Ended,” the sound of Katy Perry’s cartoonish album *Teenage Dream* was ubiquitous after its release in 2010, but her sugary and bigger-than-life style of pop music has rapidly become niche and unpopular.



***Fig 3. Katy Perry’s ‘Teenage Dream’ was a massive success in 2010.***

Despite being a decade old, it’s already become an outmoded sound and aesthetic, in part because it represents a framework that contemporary D.I.Y music seeks to disrupt (Pareles). The rise of D.I.Y. culture has shifted the previous structure of a successful pop project, both changing how artists craft careers and the expectations of their listeners. The internet has given listeners a taste of digital intimacy, a strange blend of complete disclosure and premeditated artifice.

The majority of an artist’s income comes from touring their album, not individual sales or placements. In the seventies and eighties, record sales were huge and albums like Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* ended up selling over 100 million copies worldwide (Knopper 10). Those days are long gone. Nowadays, listeners can quickly click through an entire album, instantly forget about

it, and then proceed to the next one. Before digital music, fans had to make a calculated investment. In seventy-seven, listeners might have had to decide between buying Brian Eno's *Before and After Science* or Iggy Pop's *The Idiot*? They'd have to listen to both in a record shop and make a value judgment on which they preferred and felt worth buying. When music was a real commodity, these fiscal decisions divided listeners by genre and taste. The act of buying a record wasn't just a purchase, but a claim to grouphood and fandom. This relationship stands in stark contrast to the artificial communities and sense of grouphood that streaming sites and social media foster. There's a lack of both commitment and binding choice in the digital landscape.

Given its negligible value, it's no longer the music itself that makes money because record sales are almost non-existent, but rather the opportunity to perform it to an established audience. Music is a vehicle for becoming famous, but it's no longer a self-sufficient commodity in modern capitalism.

### SINCERE OR SELF-AWARE?

In showcasing the stylistic incoherence in modern music, I'll describe two key genres of contemporary music that are a direct reaction to the recent democratization of the music industry: bedroom pop and hyper pop. One of the only common features between these two genres is that their artists often record from home. These genres have managed to create commercial visual and sonic content while remaining affordable and independent. Even outside these genres, there's a long list of contemporary musicians like Steve Lacy, Ariel Pink, and Billie Eilish that have made a point about not using professional studios, a now typical practice of musicians living in quarantine (Wray). In looking at these genres, I want to examine how they've splintered the ubiquity and cultural unity of past mainstream music. I want to trace the notion of digital isolation through the communities that these modern genres foster.

In the past, the road to becoming a music producer much harder. People with ambitions in music would try to get a job at a studio as a second engineer or ‘tape op.’ These jobs were not well-paid, but extremely sought after. They were internships that allowed people to clean up around the studio and setup the tape machine, while looking over the shoulder of a seasoned mix engineer or producer to learn the tricks of the trade. The studio staff would eventually start giving them more responsibility and they’d slowly advance up the ladder. It’s a far-more regimented and businesslike setup than most people would expect. In his autobiography, Geoff Emerick, the famous sound engineer of the Beatles, said that getting an assistant engineer's job at EMI records in the early 60s was highly competitive and that he was one of two kids in North London who successfully applied (30). It was hard to break through in the music industry.

Although studio conduct and label requirements loosened as time went on, the hallowed and exclusive realm of the recording studio remained unbroken until the early 2000s. Throughout the free-spirited punk and grunge movements, artists still needed to enlist the help of professional sound engineers and mixers to bring their music to mainstream appeal. For example, the Sex Pistols enlisted producer Chris Thomas and engineer Bill Price to create their first and only album *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* (Buskin, *The Sex Pistols*).



*Fig 4. Sex Pistols recording demos at Wessex Studios in 1977*

Despite being known for a reckless and teetering-on-the-edge mélange of sound, the Sex Pistols needed a professional clarity to reach mainstream success. In the 90s, Nirvana used producer Butch Vig and now-famed mixing engineer Andy Wallace to transform their sound to similar effect on their debut album *Nevermind* (Jovanovic). The insularity of the recording studio and its close-knit community effectively guarded the gates of the music industry up until the creation of the internet.

Paul McCartney's first solo record *McCartney* from the early 70s was one of the first commercial instances of D.I.Y. and lo-fi music (Everitt). After leaving the Beatles, McCartney wanted to create an album completely distinct from the Beatles' expensive style of making records, so he recorded the album at home and embraced the rough, unpolished texture of the sound. Unlike most people at the time, he could finance setting up a home studio.



*Fig 4.1. R. Stevie Moore, an early pioneer of D.I.Y. music, at his home recording studio in 1984*

In the years to come, it would all change. D.I.Y music became a ubiquitous sound across several genres in mainstream music. The advent of Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) like Logic Pro X, Ableton 10, Reason, and GarageBand opened the doors of music production to anyone with a

laptop. These affordable programs allow artists to create anything from a rough demo to a finished, professionally mastered track. These programs have had a huge impact on the accessibility and sound of modern music production. One trend that became apparent after these programs became widely popular is that artists have slowly moved away from forming bands, instead opting to create ‘projects.’ Artists like Wild Nothing, King Krule, Bon Iver, Caribou, M83, LCD Soundsystem, Tame Impala, Blood Orange, and St. Vincent are all one-person music ‘projects’ that advertise themselves as bands when they play live. The reason they’ve moved away from the ‘band’ title is because they can have more creative control and cheaper production costs if they create the album themselves. The live group only assembles to perform the record, not create it. Capitalism is driving musicians to become more insular and private in their work.

While other contemporary music does all of this behind closed doors, bedroom pop is a genre that openly celebrates and markets the D.I.Y aesthetic. It’s a new style of music marked by the internet-facing isolation of Gen Z artists. With a naive electronic sound, it offers genuine and uncomplicated portrayals of love, anxiety, and loneliness in an increasingly cynical and self-conscious social climate. In a *New Yorker* article entitled “Clairo and the Fuzzy, D.I.Y. Sounds of Bedroom Pop,” Carrie Battan argues that “at some point in the past decade, the bedroom replaced the garage as the primary spiritual escape hatch for suburban teenager who wanted to express themselves through music” (Battan et al.). Whereas the garage was a communal experience, the bedroom is a solitary haven for current music makers. Bedroom pop’s role as an act of escape serves a different function compared to older music. Instead of rebellion, the movement is centered around a self-imposed isolation that protects people within its community.



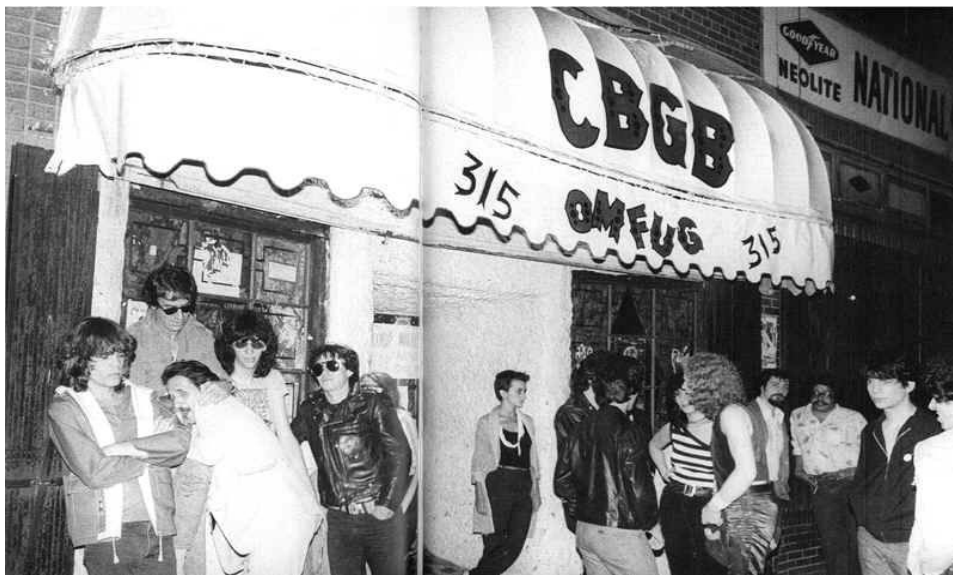
*Fig 6. Clairo, an early pioneer of the Bedroom Pop genre who went viral with D.I.Y music video*

It doesn't outwardly project anxiety and adolescent insecurity but instead creates a space for it to develop outside of the broader scrutiny of the internet and the world at large. In other words, bedroom pop creates a teenage fantasy world that values simplicity over the harrowing nature of our modern world.

The rising success of bedroom pop artists is one of the most interesting features of this new subculture. Artists like Cuco, Clairo, Girl in Red, and Rex Orange County have millions of streams and followers across social media despite not conforming to previous beauty and music production standards (Snapes). Inflated streaming numbers are characteristic of the internet nowadays, but the point remains that these artists would never have had any form of mainstream exposure in decades prior. Popular culture has never rewarded independent and cheaply produced music up until now. However, there's a substantial difference between digital and real success. These artists experience tremendous streaming numbers and substantial fan engagement on social media, but it does not linearly translate to their live concert attendance or other measures of

real-world popularity. These artists normally play smaller touring circuits, not theaters or arenas like other big pop bands of their size.

Among these artists, there's also a newfound geographic diversity that's emblematic of our increasingly digital cultural sphere. For example, artists like Girl in Red and Boy Pablo are both from Norway which has historically been disconnected from popular music hubs like London, or Germany. Music 'scenes' that grew naturally out of local venues, labels, or economic support from the government (Bruenger 144).



*Fig 7. CBGB's, a venue frequented by The Ramones, Talking Heads, and Patti Smith in the 70s*

In the past, musical styles and trends have been centered around a local center like CBGB's in New York or Laurel Canyon in Los Angeles. In his autobiography, Chris Frantz of Talking Heads' fame remembers The Ramones and Patti Smith playing a double header at CBGB's with a half empty audience (120). Despite modest beginnings, these music scenes were often necessary starting points for global success. Nowadays, geography is an insignificant variable for pre-



dicting access to success. The internet and recent globalization provide equal access for all artists, regardless of their locale, but divorces them from a tangible community. An online fanbase functions differently from a closed-off and burgeoning music scene.

Compared to bedroom pop, PC music and its subsequent genre hyperpop lie on the opposite end of the spectrum. Headed by British producer A.G. Cook, the PC music collective is a collection of twenty-something Londoners that make exaggerated, parodic pop music that sounds equal parts bubblegum as it does schizophrenic (Wolfson).



*Fig 8. Video artist Ryan Trecartin's work has had a major impact on the aesthetics of PC music*

Their music is an exercise of indulgence and reveling in the consumer and post-internet society we live in today (Monroe). The collective and label have several affiliated artists including SOPHIE, Oneohtrix Point Never, and Bladee (Sherburne). In a lot of ways, the music of PC music and their affiliates is a more self-aware EDM with wonky synth textures and glitchy production. It investigates the gratification of popular music and the manufactured digital sheen that's characteristic of high-grossing music nowadays. Unlike bedroom pop, it's not a sincere approach to

music making. It markets itself as a more intellectual and mature approach to both navigating and commenting on postmodern culture, something bedroom pop does not engage. It's not a traditional maturity in terms of lyrics or composition, but rather these artists want to express stylistic maturity. While PC music embraces parody, these artists also draw on the idea of pastiche. These artists want their fans to enjoy the Eurodance influences in their music without feeling guilty. Rather than creating its own distinct style, it's the combination of influences that these artists use to elicit emotion. At the end of the day, they're more interested in being evocative than anything else. In postmodern society, the act of causing a reaction is itself an achievement.

Hyperpop is the sub-genre that emerged from PC music. Although few would describe their music as hyperpop, the genre includes artists like Charli XCX, 100 geecs, Rico Nasty, and Earthater. The resistance to being labeled as hyperpop has to do with both the incongruencies between artists in the genre and the general ethos of music making today. Charli XCX, a media darling of the hyperpop movement, has been notoriously skeptical of the identification, tweeting in July of 2020 that she does not "identify with music genres" (Enis). She followed that statement by posing, "what is hyperpop?" to further underline her confusion over the genre designation. Her confusion makes a lot of sense. Why give a movement that purposefully shape shifts and breaks boundaries a catch-all name? This move away from genre and being "trapped in a box" is a hallmark of contemporary digital music. The purposefully vague Spotify playlist "idk." underlines this development (Ibid.).

Like bedroom pop, hyperpop artists embrace D.I.Y. music production and marketing. These artists often choose to remain independent and create content without corporate help. With no major label intervention, the newfound independence has a noticeable effect on the liberal aesthetic of their work.



***Fig 9. SOPHIE, a transgender hyperpop artists that has both pioneered the sound and gender-bending aesthetics of the movement.***

Artists on SoundCloud are mixing and matching sounds from emo, lo-fi, glitch, and nightcore to name a few (Ibid.). Instead of a unified aesthetic, it's a boiling pot of all the experimental far-flung corners of the internet. In this way, it makes sense that these artists don't feel a sense of community under the moniker "hyperpop" because they all feel they're creating different and original music. With the internet, the line between different genres has become increasingly diffuse and, in turn, the notion of classification has become more ridiculous. Are there implications to this blurring line?

#### THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In looking at these two genres, my intention is not to pass a value judgement on either of them. It's not to convince the reader that bedroom pop is overly sincere and shallow, while hyperpop is intellectual and destabilizing. I fully recognize that each genre's style must be taken with a grain of salt and that there's a purposeful marketing strategy behind the digital sheen and fantasy. Bedroom pop artists hope to look like carefree sixteen-year-olds who write simple love

songs about their high school crush, despite being twenty-somethings with high hopes of entering the competitive and anxiety-inducing music industry. Likewise, hyperpop artists are cognizant that their scathing critique of mass culture is a profitable one and that the style is quickly reaching mainstream ubiquity, the antithesis of what they've supposedly tried to achieve with their music. Within capitalism, subcultures like these cannot exist at the mainstream level without some prerequisite hypocrisy. As the style becomes more pronounced and popular, newer artists will align themselves with it regardless of artistic integrity or personal taste. While the early pioneers and true believers have a claim to authenticity, widespread success in capitalism cultivates dishonesty and artifice.

Instead, these two subcultures represent the cultural incoherence in modern music. The styles of bedroom pop and hyperpop are diametrically opposed to one another yet exist in perfect harmony. There's a dissolving status quo in music nowadays. The internet has allowed communities like bedroom pop and hyperpop to be self-sufficient by bringing together large but disparate sets of people all over the world and concentrating their support. Therefore, these genres don't answer to a general demand. Their appeal can be more centered around a specific group of people, something Dick Hebdige isolates as a crucial feature of subculture (During). In this way, these genres occupy a new liminal space between being relatively mainstream yet remaining a burgeoning subculture.

The actual mainstream has also undergone a noticeable shift, perhaps because these new digital clusters like bedroom pop and hyperpop have decentralized their general audience. In an interview with *Variety*, Billie Eilish said that mainstream music has become increasingly "genreless" and that big songs nowadays don't "necessarily have a genre or a specific sound" (*Variety* 0:39 – 0:45). She's felt this effect personally because her hit song "bad guy" occupied the charts

with four completely distinct and incongruous songs throughout 2019, including the country-tinged trap song “Old Town Road” by Lil Nas X and the anthemic pop song “Sunflower” by Post Malone and Swae Lee.

While Billie Eilish is excited by this new genre-less trend, what does this say about the purpose of subculture in our modern world? Or the lack of a status quo to rebel against? As Dick Hebdige argues, subcultures “cobble together (or hybridize) styles out of the images and material culture available to them in the effort to construct identities that will confer on them *relative autonomy*” (1). They need the status quo to remain constant for their work to remain meaningful. In a sense, a movement can only create a feeling of cohesive grouphood when society has an inherently otherizing effect on its constituents. It’s the dismissal and judgement passed on by the status quo that gives substance and contour to a subcultural movement. They band together not through *denial* of the dominant ideology but through a continued resistance to it. Subculture has no desire to create a total division between mass culture and itself, but rather it establishes distinct styles that offer relative autonomy within its restrictive apparatus.

The reality is that these new subcultures like bedroom pop and hyperpop are not only incoherent and isolated from each other, they lack the gusto of prior and foundational subcultures like youth culture or camp. As I’ve mentioned, the general ethos in musicmaking nowadays is that subscribing to genre conventions or other forms of grouphood is antiquated, arguably because of the recent advent of both identity politics and neoliberalism which I’ll discuss later in the paper. Back in the days of punk and Thatcher, however, people rallied around the idea of being a “punker” (McLaren and McLaren). It was simultaneously an individual and group identity that signified a united front against mainstream rock and the establishment writ large. People felt comfortable attaching themselves to this bigger concept because they truly believed in it.

Similarly, the music in the 60s was both extremely politicized and popular, with protest songs like Bob Dylan's "Only a Pawn in their Game," Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come," and Aretha Franklin's "Chain of Fools." Dylan and Cooke wrote directly about the civil rights movement, while Franklin tackled the Vietnam war. These songs were integral to the Black panthers, Chicano activists, and hippie movement in America. They represented a cultural disavowal of the current political events and a social commitment to the people, especially those hoping for profound change. Although these social groups were separate, they were each a large and united front (Maldonado). 60s protest songs were the soundtrack to a profound and general optimism that hoped the system could change for the better.

Nowadays, in the era of Trump, we haven't seen a similar cultural response, or at least anything beyond YG's heavy-handed single from 2016 entitled "Fuck Donald Trump." It's especially strange considering the current sociopolitical conditions are strikingly similar to the 60s (Fallows). We've had Black Lives Matter protests and huge social media campaigns, but we haven't seen a mass movement in music. To conceive a fuller theoretical picture of modern subculture and its apoliticism, it's necessary to investigate the evolution of early subculture and how its "rebellion" against the status quo was a form of therapy for disaffected members of capitalism and why its function has been threatened in our digital age.

### THE POLITICS OF EARLY SUBCULTURE

In 1944 during World War II, two Jewish refugees drafted a seminal text called "the Culture Industry" that criticized the new American approach of mass-produced, cookie-cutter content, rather than allowing the cultural sphere to be a space for creative thought. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued that it restricted the general public's freedom of thought

and marked a dangerous shift in their society. They noticed that “in Germany the graveyard stillness of the dictatorship already hung over the gayest films of the democratic era” (9). The ‘prearranged harmony’ of the culture industry had threatened the reflexivity of the public sphere, opening the gates for fascism to rule in its stead.

In his work, the media theorist and sociologist Dick Hebdige views subculture as having a social contract with the culture industry, rather than disrupting it. Subculture allows people to carve out a new space for themselves in society that offers both aesthetic distinction and relative autonomy. They can resist the pre-packaged content of mainstream culture but not entirely break away from it either. The power of these movements comes from their dialogue with the social and political status quo they seek to subvert. After World War II, an entire generation of parents expected their kids to be thankful for the world’s economic stability and better living standards. Instead, films like *Rebel Without a Cause* fueled a burgeoning youth culture movement and James Dean effectively invented the modern teenager.



*Fig 10. Still from Nicholas Ray's 'Rebel Without a Cause' starring James Dean*

It was a teenage rebellion that pleased a specific set of people at the expense of another. The movement derived its power equally from upset parents as it did Dean’s chiseled jawline and

cheeky sarcasm. It wasn't a real threat to the culture industry, but it allowed kids to imagine a world beyond the status quo it helped maintain. It's a fantasy of disruption. The rise of subculture in the 50s seemed to be a social device that could check and alter the 'stillness' that Adorno and Horkheimer had lamented on in "the Culture Industry" during the war.

However, the culture industry secretly welcomes subculture. After a movement reaches a terminal size, mainstream culture will often steal or commodify the aesthetics of a subcultural movement to turn a big profit (During and Hebdige 1). For record executives or film producers, subcultures act like focus groups that can test which styles will resonate and sell with a wider expanse of consumers. Since *Rebel Without a Cause* came out, there have been several iterations of youth culture and each one, from mods to punks, eventually transitioned to popular culture. The same existential rebellion re-stylized and re-purposed for another decade of political unrest and social discontent, but each time with slightly diminishing returns. For example, John Hughes' *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* released in 1986 was a watered-down and commercial instance of the youth culture formula. It broke no boundaries and asked no big questions, but it did make a huge amount of money. As Robin Wood argues, Reagan's administration was a neoliberal assault on our collective ideological confidence in capitalism and films like *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* helped paper the cracks (203). They reaffirmed the relationship of subculture to the public, even if they were noticeably diluted. In the long term, the provocations of subculture help update the culture industry, so it never fully loses touch with its consumers. In a sense, it's like tearing a muscle that only grows back stronger. Subculture threatens popular culture, but eventually falls prey to it. That being said, the process of updating our public sphere, albeit not disruptively, gently pushes our culture in the right direction. It's a healthy relationship that promotes cultural pluralism and the democratization of taste culture (Gans 176).



The evolution of the aesthetic camp is an excellent example for understanding the dual relationship between subculture and the mainstream. With its formulaic pop songs and velvet clothing, the glam rock movement in the 70s was one of the first commercial instances of camp (Gregory). Heavily inspired by Vaudeville and early Hollywood, camp is a subculture that celebrates theatrical behavior and outlandish clothing. As Susan Sontag wrote in her essay *Notes on Camp*, “All Camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice... [it’s] a vision of the world in terms of style— but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not” (3). Through the years, the camp aesthetic has been a staple of both old and modern queer culture. While glam rock pioneered a cultural disavowal of homophobia, the movement was largely heralded by white and relatively heteronormative bands like Roxy music, Slade, The Glitter Band, and arguably David Bowie.



*Fig 11. Roxy Music, a group that pioneered the glam rock aesthetic and proved to be a jumping off point for founding member Brian Eno.*

While Bowie claimed to be bisexual in 1972 edition of *Melody Maker*, one of the earliest weekly music magazines, he later claimed that he had been a “closeted heterosexual” throughout the

glam rock period (Wicks). The same vague bisexuality also surrounds members of Slade and Roxy music. In this way, the advent of glam rock was a socially positive event that pushed our social consciousness in the right direction, but its entrance into the mainstream was neither a seismic shift nor without fault. As it became more popular, the queer element of glam rock slowly became a commodity and younger bands were trying to cash in on the movement not through camp-like artifice, but willful deceit. They wore outrageous clothing, adopted ostentatious personas, and pretended to be gay because it had become the new status quo. While *overall* the movement had the right spirit, the pressure of success and money eventually affected the integrity of the subculture's original mission statement. It became complicit with the workings of capitalism.

It's for this reason that subcultures normally have an arc. When the movement is starting, it has a claim to authenticity. The style is *new* and uncorrupted. It actually stands for something meaningful. As it becomes more popular, it becomes ubiquitous and profitable. Young up-and-coming bands are no longer breaking out of a mold but adhering to a new set of expected values. Corporate executives welcome copy-cat bands because they expect them to be as profitable as their predecessors, but the consumers put an end to this cycle. They can sense when the subculture has effectively "sold-out" and lost touch with the essential force that originally propelled it to success and yearn for something new. In these interim periods, a new and distinct subculture will often invade the mainstream and supersede the old one. Be it glam rock to prog rock, disco to punk, or grunge to 2000s pop, there has always been a transition centered around polar opposites. Sites of fundamental opposition and stylistic division are what give a new movement its power because it creates a sense of "us versus them." With the neoliberalism of Thatcher, punk

framed its fight against the economic conditions in England around a distaste for the extravagant expenditures and private jets of bands like Led Zeppelin.



*Fig 12. Iggy Pop, a central inspiration for early punk music, has a strong and publicized dislike for classical rock bands like Led Zeppelin*

It created a cultural battle that could stand in for its greater political message. The stylistic rift between two polar opposites is where political action is framed and conducted in the cultural sphere. In this way, mainstream media often co-opts a subcultural movement to create a new status quo, but it also sets the stage for a new rebellious style to take its place and make a political statement in the process. But is there a sense of a political function in music today? Is this same rebellion in music taking place? Is there a compelling statement behind contemporary subculture?

#### PASTICHE RUINS THE MYTH OF SUBCULTURE

It's hard to pinpoint the exact definition of postmodernism since its used both as a periodizing concept, an aesthetic designation, and a theoretical framework. Since a proper definition of

postmodernism is often fleeting or vague, scholars often regard it as a disavowal of high modernism, rather than a stand-alone entity. It's defined by what it's not. Since the early work of musicians like Philip Glass and Talking Heads, however, the stylistic contours of a unified and purposefully schizophrenic style become apparent (Belton and Jameson 185).



*Fig 13. Talking Heads performing in 1978*

One of the central features of postmodernism is the notion of pastiche or “blank parody.” Normal parody mocks or satirizes the unconventional and idiosyncratic styles of modernist art because they transgress a universal norm. They don't conform to an established standard. Postmodernism denies the existence of that universal norm and therefore denies the existence of the joke as well. There's no conception of *normal* by which the eccentric is conversely funny. With no universal norm, there's also no hierarchy of value. When neither high nor low art can be mocked, the demarcation between them fails to exist. In postmodernism's time and space, the act of impersonating past styles is not only a part of the contemporary artist's toolkit but possibly the only tool left.

The advent of modernism increasingly fragmented and privatized language. It privileged the self as having a distinctive command of language, rather than believing that the “language speaks us” as David Foster Wallace described it (2). Frederic Jameson, the literary critic and philosopher, argues that these modernist developments created an “explosion into a host of private styles and mannerisms... each group coming to speak a curious private language of its own, each profession developing its private code or idiolect” (Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 188). Building off this social revolution, there was a consensus among social theorists, psychoanalysts, and poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes that a modern subjectivity no longer exists, or quite possibly ever existed (Ibid. 189). Often referred to as the postmodern “death of the subject,” it negates any further creation of personal style or strain of thought. Instead, artists are left to recycle, recombine, and remodel the past in perpetuity.

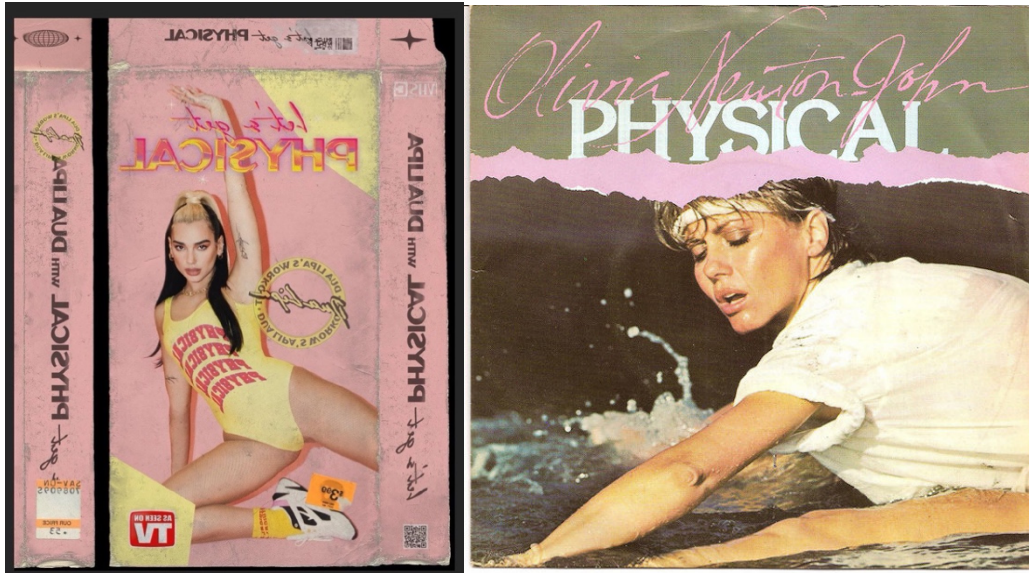
According to Jameson, total pastiche is therefore a world “in which stylistic invocation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum... the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past” (Belton and Jameson 190). In this way, it makes sense that hyperpop artists don’t want to fall under any general genre heading. Their work is private and isolated from the rest of the world. It’s a paradox because, as individuals, they feel their work is more personal than ever before, but their work makes no stylistic invocation against the cultural material that predates them. Personal no longer equates originality. Instead, their art is an amalgam of prior work that creates the illusion of originality. Labels like glitchcore, lo-fi, and emo signify division from other artists, but their value as a personal commodity is next to none. As people move further inward, society’s stylistic diversity grows but there’s no net difference.

The idea of pastiche occurred at the same time as another postmodern development. The postmodern incredulity towards grand narratives like the nuclear family, Christianity, and capitalism (Lyotard) coincided with the dissolution of the cultural black and white, a central feature of subculture's relationship to the mainstream. The boundaries between genre and metanarratives blurred simultaneously. Both the intimate inner workings of selfhood and expansive ideas like capitalism were systems of understanding the world. Therefore, on both ends of the spectrum, there was a loss of faith in the macro and micro fairy tales that gave us the illusion of traversing a concrete and substantive world.

Subculture was one of the operative social features that continued the modernist sense of metanarrative and individualism. For example, youth culture's anti-establishment message is predicated on a binary understanding of its enemy. It frames the cultural battle as good versus evil. Punk was at war with Britain's crumbling welfare state, but Thatcher's neoliberalism also gave them an objective narrative to understand their music's message and its imagined effect on society. After all, Dick Hebdige argued that discontinuity and dissonance are essential for sub-cultural forms to create a sense of group experience (During and Hebdige 4). By destabilizing hierarchy, postmodernism shifts discontinuity as a confrontational relationship between a dominant and counter-hegemonic narrative to a passive, unilateral relationship between private styles. Although the disruption of hierarchy should provide an egalitarian and democratic environment for culture, it creates a widespread and undirected sense of incoherence. The private and isolated styles of bedroom pop and hyperpop experience dissonance between themselves and other styles, but without a sense conflict. Their dissonance is not stylistically confrontational and therefore not a site of political discourse. Incoherence in culture no longer reflects the political present. Postmodernism pronounces the villain as dead, while the crime continues unqualified.

Historically, subculture also reifies the notion of the individual because, as a co-opted subcultural movement becomes hegemonic, it's often the personal and stylistic rift of a burgeoning movement that creates a site of fundamental opposition. It's the sense of cultural *invention* that initiates a political revival in the cultural sphere and safeguards the reflexivity that Adorno and Horkheimer so cherished. A new style is not complicit in the failure of past cultural forms and, therefore, a symbol of revival. It begins a new era of hope and autonomy for its supporters. For example, when punk first started, it hadn't 'sold out' or lost its claim to authenticity.

In contemporary mainstream music, the idea of pastiche is inescapable. Nowadays, artists are cannibalizing all the styles of the past into overstimulated objects of ahistorical nostalgia. With the lack of new styles, the culture industry has been forced to commodify the notion of "pastness," the quality of a nostalgic time before the complexity of the postmodern era. As Jameson explains, "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (Natoli et al. 332). In other words, the past is no longer a real world, but a repository for cultural artifacts. In contemporary music, artists are using this repository to great effect. Both The Weeknd and Dua Lipa, two of the biggest pop stars in the world, have effectively "brought back" an 80s world that has no bearing with reality. It's a simulated world pieced together from cultural artifacts and the general essence of the period in our collective consciousness (Holden). Dua Lipa recently released an album entitled *Future Nostalgia* that takes inspiration from Kylie Minogue-inspired disco, 80s synth pop, and funk (Gaca). Even the name *Future Nostalgia* encapsulates this idea of pioneering style forward, while still having to look backwards.



**Fig 14. Promotional pictures from Dua Lipa’s 2020 single “Physical” and Olivia Newton-John’s single “Physical” released in 1981.**

An obsessive Michael Jackson fan, The Weeknd also released an 80s themed album this year which has been his biggest commercial success to date, proving the consumer demand for nostalgia-driven music (Trust). Electronic duo The Midnight argue that the resurgence of the 80s sound might be because fans “miss the simplicity of different times” (Holden). Music has always had an element of escapism, but now more than ever listeners are eager to escape our contemporary cultural landscape and enter another.

With pastiche, there’s a circulation of past styles that have all been, at some point or another, complicit with the mainstream. For example, the reputation and *association* with camp has evolved over time. Nowadays, the supposedly funny marvel films like *Thor Ragnarök* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* are indebted to camp and its ability to offer something *new* to bored audiences, actively counteracting the million-dollar special effects and self-serious action sequences that are associated with the Marvel franchise. Even Trump’s reelection campaign owes a great deal to the camp sensibility (Kornhaber). The past as ‘referent’ to these nostalgic styles and



objects eventually becomes diluted and corrupted because, as they eventually exit the mainstream and become objects in the pantheon of cultural history, they themselves become a part of the past. Their complicity with the mainstream becomes a part of the 'referent.' These cultural objects become necessary references to new cultural material that invokes the original notion of nostalgia, despite them lying adjacent to the real event. Therefore, new cultural material will invoke a nostalgia that is progressively diluted by a shifting and increasingly postmodern 'referent.' The concept of 'nostalgia' will become increasingly complicit with the mainstream styles that seek to profit from it. For example, British cultural theorist Mark Fisher argues that no one felt this growing complicity more than Kurt Cobain who "in his dreadful lassitude and objectless rage... seemed to give wearied voice to the despondency of a generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated tracked, bought and sold" (9). The nostalgia of rebellious youth culture movements became see-through and commercial. A pre-planned script with none of its original power.

The dissolution of metanarratives and stylistic invention hampers the creation of subculture. There's no longer a dominant narrative to break away from to achieve both relative autonomy and a cohesive sense of grouphood. Instead, it's replaced by the limbo environment that the postmodern subject invariably inhabits. There are no modern-day Kurt Cobain's who wrestle with this predetermined cultural battle either. There's been a passive submission in mainstream music. Unlike glamorous 80s pop being overtaken by the oversized, ripped sweaters of the 90s grunge period, nowadays these styles of fundamental opposition don't supersede and precede each other, but rather coexist. For example, the cultural incoherence of hyperpop and bedroom pop would never have existed at the same time in past decades. Instead, an era of hyperpop and

its neurotic self-awareness may have been replaced with a decade of sweet bedroom pop sincerity. These two genres would have marked a transition point, not two friendly acquaintances who respect each other but are not close friends. There's no excitement in that.

As Mark Fisher writes about in *Capitalist Realism*, there's a universal sense that capitalism is the only operable and feasible political system that it's now impossible to imagine beyond its horizon and envision an alternative to it. The issue with postmodernism's offensive on capitalism is that it's a politics of refusal. As I've mentioned, subculture used to be a social feature that could enact reformative action. It slowly updated the dominant narrative in culture, while never fully disrupting it. Conversely, postmodernism tries to destabilize and disrupt. It wants to cast out the 'system' and enact real revolution. In a world where it's impossible to imagine anything but capitalism, where does that leave us? In its pursuit of disruption, postmodernism risks total submission. It risks creating a world of reiteration and re-permutation with no net change. Fisher compares it to 'the Thing' in John Carpenter's film of the same name in that it's "a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact" (6). If 'the Thing' swallowed postmodernism, left within its theoretical gut without a vehicle for reformative action or a claim to autonomy, how would it degrade and decompose? Just as artists can't create new styles, postmodernism cannot mount a second offensive on the system it seeks to tear down.

We've reached the postmodern end-of-the-line and the social contract between subculture and the mainstream is under threat. The relative autonomy that subculture used to give its followers was a fantasy, a glimpse of a world beyond capitalism. It was the dream of a *real* revolution couched in leather jackets with bobby pins or glamorous outfits and caked makeup. Pastiche has

ruined the illusion and myth of subculture as a political mode of cultural involvement. Is the culture industry undergoing a new era of 'stillness' through its over-consumption and wide representation of eclectic styles and aesthetics? Has the sociopolitical function of subculture become null and void? When there's no hot or cold in mainstream music, we're left with an eclectic pool of lukewarm water.

### BUT HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

While poststructuralist and postmodernist scholars lost faith in metanarratives and stylistic genesis, it's not immediately clear how that extended to the general public and the artists in our cultural sphere. In other words, scholarship does not directly elicit sociopolitical change, but rather classifies it. Scholars like Jameson predicted the nature of several events that have conspired in recent cultural history, but he did not instigate them. Instead, it's the widespread adoption of postmodern ideology in walks of social and political life that caused this dramatic shift. The internet being their central purveyor.

In particular, the intervention of neoliberal thought into leftist postmodernism has cemented some of its biggest paradoxes. For example, if postmodernism claims to democratize and decentralize, why does it breed anxiety and loneliness? In destabilizing ideas like capitalism, why does postmodernism amplify its effects? And why did the previous relationship between the mainstream and subculture, despite upholding the culture industry, feel more satisfying? After all, it's that prior satisfaction that has led to nostalgia being a commodity in our cultural economy. It allows consumers to harken back to a time where politics were traversable, and people knew what they were fighting.

Postmodernism established the ideological conditions for neoliberalism's isolating effects to take place. In the end, it's not the bedroom pop or hyperpop artists' fault that they have

an isolated and incongruous relationship with each other, but rather the systems and ideologies that control them. Although postmodernism dispelled myths like capitalism and Christianity, it created a unilateral and unfocused incoherence in its stead. The increasingly personal and private styles are a plea against widespread complicity, an absolution from a hidden enemy. Everyone is left to defend their private island— or perhaps digital bubble is more apropos.

### NEOLIBERALISM FUELS THE FIRE

In tracing neoliberalism's effect on the music industry, I must take a slight detour and cover the argument of communicative capitalism that Jodi Dean establishes in her book entitled *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. In the book, she argues that “from large movie theaters, to the family home to the singular person strolling down the street wearing tiny headphones as she listens to the soundtrack of her life,” the experience of consuming media is increasingly isolated in modern capitalism. In explaining this contemporary isolation, her argument is centered around the political left and right's relationship to postmodern and post-structural language. It's a rhetoric that originally became ubiquitous amongst the academic left after their victory in the culture wars of the 80s and 90s (Dean 7). The victory paved the way for a new era of identity politics and personalization. The issue is that postmodern language was eventually co-opted by the right. The social constructions and fake news of Trump, Karl Rove, Fox News, Mitch McConnell, and many others is a hallmark of the party these days. These social constructions are indebted to postmodernism's approach towards negotiating meaning, marketing, and representation. In this way, although the political right previously centered its movement around a general distaste for moral relativism, they conceded these values to destabilize the political left and its mode of function.

The political right adopting relativist language may be the checkmate in this country's everlasting battle between two political polarities. Slavoj Žižek writes that "the true victory (the true 'negation of the negation') occurs when the enemy talks your language. In this sense, a true victory is a victory in defeat. It occurs when one's specific message is accepted as a universal ground, even by the enemy" (Mao and Žižek 393). By co-opting the left's language, the political right achieved this idea of 'true victory.' When both sides of the spectrum speak the same language, the left cannot frame their wants and desires around a site of fundamental opposition. The objectivism of Ayn Rand gave birth to neoliberalism, but the relativism of the postmodern is its perfect feeding ground. Regardless of whether the incoherence of the Republican party, anxiously toeing the line between their newfound love of relativist language and their traditional past, becomes untenable, the seed of neoliberal language has been planted in the ideology of the far left and it continues to grow. Neoliberalism has tainted the language of radical and progressive revolution.

With the internet, the decline of the Keynesian welfare state and a social commitment to each other has been accompanied by media becoming increasingly singular, individual, and personal (Dean 4). The political left has encouraged the increased connectivity, creativity, and endless opportunity of the internet, without holding itself accountable for its neoliberalization of our social politics and our economy. The postmodern identity politics of the left then don't serve an important or meaningful political function (Ibid. 5). They're distractions from the real problem. By the intervention of neoliberal ideology, they invoke privatization and selfhood as positions of victimhood that place blame elsewhere and ignore the real narrative of our political present.

Slavoj Žižek argues that the resulting era of 'post-politics' is one where individuals can politicize personal experience but never raise it to the universal (Ibid. 14). While Dean remains

hesitant of Žižek's argument and the complete dissolution of metanarrative, she finds it useful for characterizing the failure of the contemporary left and the resulting 'interpassivity' online. Using Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action and Barabasi's theory of complex networks, she finds that increased communication and technology threaten our ability to send and receive political messages in the public sphere (Ibid. 28). Therefore, Dean agrees with Žižek that political activism and public forum online are interpassive. They're a 'fetish object' that hides the futility of our actions online (Ibid. 31).

While online activism is arguably interpassive, there remains an obtuse notion of metanarrative that people use to self-assemble. Since Dean's writing, several scholars like Clay Shirky or Malcolm Gladwell have argued that the idea of 'slacktivism' remains contentious (Fuchs 189; Gladwell). Although Dean predicted the stolen election of 2016 and the lack of a united left, her ideas on political discourse online remain unsubstantiated. For example, the digital birth of the Black Lives Matters movement and the resulting protests inhibits a grey zone in Dean's general argument. However, the apparent apoliticism of the music industry fits it perfectly. Unlike these mass movements on social media, the identity politics in music doesn't have its finger on the pulse of our political present. Its increased personalization remains unperturbed by the great partisan divide of the trump era. Thatcher was a proto-Trump, and the cultural response of punk was a complete and concentrated disavowal of her administration (Lynskey). As I mentioned earlier, we have not seen a similar movement in music today.

The reason music is particularly susceptible to both postmodern and neoliberal ideology is because its discourse revolves around the formation and function of style. In a sense, it comes back to the idea that, because postmodernism is both a periodizing and aesthetic distinction, it's

difficult to give it a proper definition. Since aesthetic remains a central signifier of the postmodern, it would make sense that its post-political effects became more pronounced in art than life. As I've discussed, mainstream music has historically framed its political pursuits around subculture and its resistance to dominant ideology. The post-political nature of now both postmodernism and neoliberalism disrupted this social relationship. Artists are isolated digital bubbles that shut themselves off from the rest of the world to chase a sense of personal and neoliberal originality, despite pastiche's recycle of the past continuing in perpetuity. Although Dean argues this happens on social media with political activism, it's far harder to self-isolate politically without tapping into an ailing, but somewhat still existent metanarrative that invariably fosters a sense of grouphood. Identity politics may have hampered our discourse on social media, but it still hangs on for dear life. Considering the mechanism that music creates political discussion and division is style, music is the first cultural sphere that has become sincerely post-political, a proverbial canary in the coal mine.

Just how scholarship doesn't elicit direct change, the idea that the political left and right both adopted postmodern language does not satisfactorily explain its presence in culture or its relationship to our music landscape. The final defense between the political and cultural threshold is the culture industry. In the past, it upheld a dominant narrative in music to sell a cohesive, mainstream product to its consumers. The recent democratization of the music industry, from music production to distribution, irrevocably altered the industries relationship to consumers and artists, however. The culture industry could no longer safeguard its status quo in the face of successful D.I.Y. music. It needed to update its business model to account for a shifting cultural economy. In this way, the democratization of the music industry was the impetus for postmodern and neoliberal ideology to invade its domain. The culture industry's renegotiated position made

it fiscally subservient to the new language of its producers. In the past, the culture industry decided which styles or genres became successful. Nowadays, the culture industry promotes cultural pluralism not because it agrees with it, but because it no longer has control over it. As I've mentioned, record labels attempt to amplify an existing market or fanbase nowadays, not create them from scratch. In securing its financial position, the culture industry agreed to exist on the sideline of cultural creation.

The democratization also incentivized a neoliberal isolation. The solo 'projects' that musicians do nowadays are solitary and self-contained. The music is often written, arranged, produced, mixed, and mastered without any outside help. These artists are the epicenters of their own universe, creating music for fans they'll probably never meet beyond the scope of the internet. Nowadays, artists often proclaim that their album is "so meaningful to me" in interviews and promotional material. It's not a claim that the album will be meaningful to us, the consumers, but rather it's the neoliberal "I" that's the operative term. We have to take them at their word that their work has meaning and authenticity.



***Fig 15. Artists boy pablo and Conan Gray marketing their personal experience and a sense of private world building.***



After all, the postmodern and neoliberal focus inward has no connection to a communal narrative. Therefore, it's a personal and subjective narrative that becomes central to their work. Artists are private islands that, despite a compelling and personal brochure, can neither be visited nor accurately judged. The radically liberal and progressive language that appealed to our cultural sector has been weaponized against them. The ill effects of neoliberalism have ingratiated themselves with a supposedly boundary-breaking and democratizing ideology. Artists can no longer self-assemble into a united front. There's no longer a single narrative that ties both consumers and listeners together, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Without it, our modern and digital isolation continues to grow unfettered.

In our world, the stillness that Adorno and Horkheimer warned of in "the Culture Industry" has re-emerged. In their critique of mass culture, they were concerned about the lack of diversity in culture. Back then, the dominant narrative existed without a sense of pushback, confrontation, or dispute. Our current landscape is the polar opposite because there is no dominant narrative. The cultural pluralism and privatization of aesthetic has splintered the hegemony of the past. At this polar extreme, the stillness that marked pre-German cinema before its descent into dictatorship has had a second coming. Music no longer has its finger on the pulse of the political present. It lacks the constructive and essential reflexivity that it promises. While our public forum on social media still produces political action and grouphood like the BLM movement, the music industry and its content has completely lost the plot. The democratization of culture atomizes our relationship to music. It breaks it into small and untouchable threads, rather than a bundled narrative. Music should be a place for artists to speak the truth and wait for politics to respond, not jester's in a monarch's court.

## CONCLUSION

My experience with music has evolved over time. As a kid, it was an escape because it was simple. It stood in contrast to life itself. As I grew older, it became a mirror for understanding the world and acknowledging its shortcomings. The cultural expression of corruption, systemic control, and inequity felt like a call to arms. It was a powerful sense of grouphood and control. Music gave you the confidence to act. When a chorus lifts off the ground or there's a string swell in a climactic film, it gives listeners a hope that the world is traversable and conquerable. With the right action, it can be molded into something better. Nowadays, music doesn't move me in the same way. The mirror I felt as a teenager feels shattered with each broken piece reflecting a different reality. Collectively, we can't see each other in a broken mirror. Beyond theories and systems, the postmodern condition takes a personal toll on the human spirit. People are tired of seeing culture repeat in perpetuity, while they themselves splinter in the background. If that broken mirror were to mend itself and reassemble, would we like what stares back at us?

## Works Cited

- Aswad, Jem. "Inside the Human Science of Spotify's New Music Friday Playlist." *Variety*, Variety, 4 Dec. 2020, [variety.com/2020/music/news/spotify-new-music-friday-playlist-1234843453/](https://www.variety.com/2020/music/news/spotify-new-music-friday-playlist-1234843453/).
- Battan, Carrie, et al. "Clairo and the Fuzzy, D.I.Y. Sounds of Bedroom Pop." *The New Yorker*, 2019, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/08/19/clairo-and-the-fuzzy-diy-sounds-of-bedroom-pop](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/08/19/clairo-and-the-fuzzy-diy-sounds-of-bedroom-pop).
- "Billie Eilish & Finneas Talk Writing 'Bad Guy' and React to Their Grammy Nominations." *YouTube*, uploaded by Variety, Dec 5. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jy3RPkBR1nM>.
- Buskin, Richard. "Classic Tracks: The Cure 'A Forest'." *Sound on Sound*, 1 Dec. 2020, [www.soundonsound.com/techniques/classic-tracks-the-cure-a-forest](https://www.soundonsound.com/techniques/classic-tracks-the-cure-a-forest).
- Buskin, Richard. "Classic Tracks: The Sex Pistols 'Anarchy In The UK'." *Sound on Sound*, 1 Dec. 2020, [www.soundonsound.com/techniques/classic-tracks-sex-pistols-anarchy-uk](https://www.soundonsound.com/techniques/classic-tracks-sex-pistols-anarchy-uk).
- Chakravarti, Deboki. "A Nobel Laureate Explains the Rigged American Economy." *Scientific American*, Scientific American, 2018, [www.scientificamerican.com/video/a-nobel-laureate-explains-the-rigged-american-economy/](https://www.scientificamerican.com/video/a-nobel-laureate-explains-the-rigged-american-economy/).
- "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Verso Books, 2016, pp. 1–24.
- Daly, Rhian. "New Figures Show How Many Streams Artists Need to Earn Minimum Wage." *NME*, 19 Apr. 2020, [www.nme.com/news/music/new-figures-show-how-many-streams-artists-need-to-earn-minimum-wage-2649715](https://www.nme.com/news/music/new-figures-show-how-many-streams-artists-need-to-earn-minimum-wage-2649715).

- Dean, Jodi. *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism & Left Politics*. Duke University Press, 2009.
- Emerick, Geoff. *Here, There and Everywhere: My Life Recording the Music of The Beatles*. Gotham Books, 2010.
- Enis, Eli. "This Is Hyperpop: A Genre Tag for Genre-Less Music." *VICE*, 2020, [www.vice.com/en/article/bvx85v/this-is-hyperpop-a-genre-tag-for-genre-less-music](http://www.vice.com/en/article/bvx85v/this-is-hyperpop-a-genre-tag-for-genre-less-music).
- Everitt, Matt. "Sir Paul McCartney on His Lockdown Album: 'I Was Just Messing Around'." *BBC News*, BBC, 22 Oct. 2020, [www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-54634191](http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-54634191).
- Fallows, James. "Is This the Worst Year in Modern American History?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 1 June 2020, [www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/1968-and-2020-lessons-from-americas-worst-year-so-far/612415/](http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/1968-and-2020-lessons-from-americas-worst-year-so-far/612415/).
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2010.
- Forde, Eamonn. "Oversharing: How Napster Nearly Killed the Music Industry." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 31 May 2019, [www.theguardian.com/music/2019/may/31/napster-twenty-years-music-revolution](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/may/31/napster-twenty-years-music-revolution).
- Frantz, Chris. *Remain in Love: Talking Heads, Tom Tom Club, Tina*. St. Martin's Press, an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2020.
- Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. Sage Publications, 2017.
- Gaca, Anna. "Dua Lipa: Future Nostalgia." *Pitchfork*, Pitchfork, 27 Mar. 2020, [pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/dua-lipa-future-nostalgia/](http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/dua-lipa-future-nostalgia/).
- Gans, Herbert J. *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*. Basic Books, 2011.

Garcia-Navarro, Lulu. "How TikTok Has Changed the Music Industry." *NPR*, NPR, 27 Sept.

2020, [www.npr.org/2020/09/27/917424879/how-tiktok-has-changed-the-music-industry](http://www.npr.org/2020/09/27/917424879/how-tiktok-has-changed-the-music-industry).

Gladwell, Malcolm. "On Slacktivism." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 18 June 2017,

[www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/25/on-slacktivism](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/25/on-slacktivism).

"Greatly Exaggerated." *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*, by

David Foster Wallace, Abacus, 2013, pp. 1–3.

Gregory, Georgina. "Masculinity, Sexuality, and the Visual Culture of Glam Rock." *Culture and*

*Communication*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2002, pp. 35–60.

Hebdige, Dick. *The Cultural Studies Reader*. Edited by Simon During, Routledge, 2004.

Hern, Alex. "Spotify to Let Artists Promote Music for Cut in Royalty Rates." *The Guardian*,

Guardian News and Media, 3 Nov. 2020, [www.theguardian.com/technol-](http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/nov/03/spotify-artists-promote-music-exchange-cut-royalty-rates-payola-algorithm)

[ogy/2020/nov/03/spotify-artists-promote-music-exchange-cut-royalty-rates-payola-algorithm](http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/nov/03/spotify-artists-promote-music-exchange-cut-royalty-rates-payola-algorithm).

Holden, Steve. "How Dua Lipa and The Weeknd Are Bringing the 80s Back... Again." *BBC*

*News*, BBC, 31 Mar. 2020, [www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-52109397](http://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-52109397).

Hughes, John, director. *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. Paramount Pictures, 1986.

Jameson, Frederic. *A Postmodern Reader*. Edited by Joseph P. Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, State

University of New York Press, 1993.

Jameson, Frederic. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *Movies and Mass Culture*, by John

Belton, Athlone, 1999, pp. 185–202.

Jovanovic, Rob. *Nirvana: The Recording Sessions*. Soundcheck Books, 2012.

Knopper, Steve. *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in*

*the Digital Age*. Steve Knopper, 2017.

Kornhaber, Spencer. "Donald Trump's Reelection Campaign Is Total Camp." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 30 Oct. 2020, [www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/10/how-donald-trump-hijacked-camp/616902/](http://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/10/how-donald-trump-hijacked-camp/616902/).

Kornhaber, Spencer. "How Pop Music's Teenage Dream Ended." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 4 Sept. 2020, [www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/09/katy-perry-and-end-pop-smile-album/615757/](http://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/09/katy-perry-and-end-pop-smile-album/615757/).

Leight, Elias. "If You Can Get Famous Easily, You're Gonna Do It': How TikTok Took Over Music." *Rolling Stone*, Rolling Stone, 16 Jan. 2020, [www.rollingstone.com/pro/features/tiktok-video-app-growth-867587/](http://www.rollingstone.com/pro/features/tiktok-video-app-growth-867587/).

Levin, Tim. "Travis Scott Reportedly Earned \$20 Million through His Partnership with McDonald's." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 1 Dec. 2020, [www.businessinsider.com/travis-scott-earned-20-million-from-mcdonalds-partnership-report-2020-12](http://www.businessinsider.com/travis-scott-earned-20-million-from-mcdonalds-partnership-report-2020-12).

"Location: Scenes, Venues, Labels." *Create, Produce, Consume: New Models for Understanding Music Business*, by David Bruenger, University of California Press, 2019, pp. 143–175.

Lynskey, Dorian. "Margaret Thatcher: The Villain of Political Pop." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 8 Apr. 2013, [www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-pop-rock-music](http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-pop-rock-music).

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. University of Minnesota, 1997.

Maldonado, Devon Van Houten. "Did the Hippies Have Nothing to Say?" *BBC Culture*, BBC, 2018, [www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180529-did-the-hippies-have-nothing-to-say](http://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180529-did-the-hippies-have-nothing-to-say).

Mao, Zedong, and Slavoj Žižek. *On Practice and Contradiction*. Verso, 2017, *Amazon.com*, [www.amazon.com/Practice-Contradiction-Revolutions-Mao-Tse-Tung](http://www.amazon.com/Practice-Contradiction-Revolutions-Mao-Tse-Tung)-

ebook/dp/B01N9G6C6X/ref=sr\_1\_1?dchild=1&keywords=On+Practice+and+Contradiction&qid=1607307541&s=digital-text&sr=1-1.

McChesney, Robert Waterman. *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism Is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*. The New Press, 2014.

McCormack, Ange. "Should Spotify Pay More Per Stream? How Artists Have to Play The 'Digital Marketing Game'." *Triple j*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 17 Nov. 2020, [www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/should-spotify-pay-more/12892046](http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/should-spotify-pay-more/12892046).

McLaren, Peter, and Jonathan McLaren. "Afterword: Remaking the Revolution." *Counterpoints*, vol. 223, 2004, pp. 123–127. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/42978335](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42978335). Accessed 7 Dec. 2020.

Monroe, Jazz. "Post-Irony Is the Only Thing Left in the World That Gets a Reaction." *VICE*, 2014, [www.vice.com/en/article/6vm4md/the-past-explains-our-present-wave-of-post-irony](http://www.vice.com/en/article/6vm4md/the-past-explains-our-present-wave-of-post-irony).

"Notes on 'Camp.'" *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, by Susan Sontag, Penguin, 2009, pp. 275–293.

Pareles, Jon. "Too Pop? Too Weird? A.G. Cook of PC Music Is Stepping Out on His Own." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 Sept. 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/arts/music/ag-cook-pc-music-apple.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/arts/music/ag-cook-pc-music-apple.html).

"Paying the Bills: Music and Corporate Sponsorship." *Roland*, 2016, [www.roland.co.uk/blog/paying-the-bills-music-and-corporate-sponsorship/](http://www.roland.co.uk/blog/paying-the-bills-music-and-corporate-sponsorship/).

Ray, Nicholas, director. *Rebel without a Cause*. Warner Bros., 1955.

- Sherburne, Philip. "PC Music's Twisted Electronic Pop: A User's Manual." *Pitchfork*, 2014, [pitchfork.com/thepitch/485-pc-musics-twisted-electronic-pop-a-users-manual/](https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/485-pc-musics-twisted-electronic-pop-a-users-manual/).
- Snapes, Laura. "New Rules: The Destruction of the Female Pop Role Model." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 25 Nov. 2019, [www.theguardian.com/music/2019/nov/25/destruction-of-female-pop-role-model-decade-in-music](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/nov/25/destruction-of-female-pop-role-model-decade-in-music).
- Sterne, Jonathan, and Elena Razlogova. "Machine Learning in Context, or Learning from LANDR: Artificial Intelligence and the Platformization of Music Mastering." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2019, p. 205630511984752., doi:10.1177/2056305119847525.
- Terranova, Tiziana. "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy." *Social Text*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2000, pp. 33–58., doi:10.1215/01642472-18-2\_63-33.
- Trust, Gary. "The Year in Charts 2020: The Weeknd's 'Blinding Lights' Is the No. 1 Hot 100 Song of the Year." *Billboard*, 3 Dec. 2020, [www.billboard.com/articles/business/chart-beat/9493054/the-weeknd-blinding-lights-hot-100-song-2020-year-in-charts](https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/chart-beat/9493054/the-weeknd-blinding-lights-hot-100-song-2020-year-in-charts).
- Wicks, Kevin. "David Bowie's LGBT Legacy." BBC America, 1 Jan. 1965, [www.bbcamerica.com/anglophenia/2016/01/david-bowies-lgbt-legacy](https://www.bbcamerica.com/anglophenia/2016/01/david-bowies-lgbt-legacy).
- Wikström, Patrik. "The Music Industry in an Age of Digital Distribution." *Queensland University of Technology*, 2013, [www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/articles/the-music-industry-in-an-age-of-digital-distribution/](https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/articles/the-music-industry-in-an-age-of-digital-distribution/).
- Wolfson, Sam. "PC Music: The Future of Pop or 'Contemptuous Parody'?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 2 May 2015, [www.theguardian.com/music/2015/may/02/pc-music-dance-music-collective](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/may/02/pc-music-dance-music-collective).



Wood, Robin. "Papering the Cracks: Fantasy and Ideology in the Reagan Era." *Movies and Mass Culture*, by John Belton, Rutgers Univ. Press, 2000, pp. 203–228.

Wray, Daniel Dylan. "My Studio Is an Extra Limb Right Now': Bedroom Pop, the Perfect Genre for Lockdown." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 12 May 2020, [www.theguardian.com/music/2020/may/12/my-studio-is-an-extra-limb-right-now-bedroom-pop-the-perfect-genre-for-lockdown](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/may/12/my-studio-is-an-extra-limb-right-now-bedroom-pop-the-perfect-genre-for-lockdown).